

LeRoy Watson in the CBI Theater of WW II



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My dad was born in Pearland, Texas in 1923. He is still remembered there. He grew up in the depression and started his military service during World War II. He was a flight engineer in Curtiss C-46 transport aircraft flying “over The Hump” of the Himalayas from India to Burma and China to supply Allied forces in the war against Japan. One of his brothers, Allan, was killed in the Philippines in 1944.

I don't know much about his experiences during the war. He did not talk about it, and when I asked him how he got the medals he said everybody over there got them. After the war, my dad continued with the U.S. Air Force, no longer the Army Air Forces but its own branch of the military. He flew throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. He logged many hours in “Old Shaky,” the Douglas C-124 Globemaster II. He went on to the Boeing VC-135B, a military version of the Boeing 707 jetliner, then went on to the Lockheed C-141 StarLifter in which he logged at least ten thousand hours in the air.

When he retired, he continued in the 708th Airlift Squadron of the reserves based at Travis Air Force Base, California. After that, he worked in the huge hanger where engines were repaired. Here, he handed out tools and talked with old Air Force buddies. He flew small planes at the Aero Club. He got a Piper

Apachetwin-engine aircraft and converted it with a pointed nose and other features to a Geronimo Apache, making it much faster. Later he got a more modern Piper Seneca, but I think he always liked the old Apache best. Its number was N1354P, November one three five four papa.

The graphic above, representing his World War II service in the China Burma India Theater, is by no means an adequate summary of his life or even of his military service. As I said, he flew as a flight engineer in the Air Force for at least three decades past that, well into the Jet Age. What I remember is him routinely coming home from Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines, and Japan. Not every kid's dad commuted that far on a regular basis! Consider this page a beginning. I hope to have separate pages for different aspects of his life and character soon. If any Army Air Forces or Air Force veterans read this and recognize his name, I hope you will write and tell me about it.

LeRoy Watson had a major stroke in 1989, from which he never fully recovered. Nonetheless, he enjoyed another nine years of friends and family, especially family. I never knew anyone so good with kids as him. He saw grandkids and great grandkids, but he also saw more and more of his old friends pass on. He hated getting old, not being able to do what he used to be able to do. He was bicycling and driving almost to the very end though.

He and I went to the Reno Air Races many times. Some of his old Air Force buddies, flight engineers and pilots from Military Airlift Command, regularly parked their RV's at the end of the runway every year. We would visit them while we were there. He took me and my girlfriend of the time with her son to the Reno Air Races in September 1997, nine months before he died. He saw Gary Levitzrace Miss Ashley II for the first time there. He kept up with the latest hot rod airplanes, and really liked this one. The previous spring, he had finally seen me get a college degree after a long time trying. The next spring, in what was to be his last public event, he went with me to see my girlfriend of the time get her college degree. He was very proud of both of us. He was obviously not feeling well, and he told me on the drive home that he was finished, but he had had a good life.

A week later, he went into the hospital. A week after that he was dead from viral pneumonia, June 8, 1998. All the machines in the hospital, with all their whirring and buzzing and clicking, with all their flashing lights and tubes and wires stuck into his body, could not keep him alive. I miss him, but I know we all have to go sometime. Considering how many tens of thousands of hours he flew, rode motorcycles, and did other things, he was lucky to make it as long as he did. He lived his life, and he saw and did many things. If I can be half a good a father to my kids as he was to me, my sisters, and his grandkids, I will have done an exceptional job.